

When the Nontraditional Becomes Traditional: **Addressing the Needs of Student-Parents in Higher Education**

RESULTS OF THE I-PARENTS RESEARCH

“My children belonging to the community mattered more to me than me belonging to one. It would have been nice if we all could have been involved in the same community.”

Participant's comment in narrative section of student-parent survey conducted Spring 2012

BACKGROUND

This paper responds to a recommendation from the 2011 Student-Parent Summit that convened in the Student Development and Residential Programs (SDRP) building at Ikenberry Commons. The purpose of the summit was to continue the dialogue about the characteristics and associated needs of Illinois undergraduate or graduate students who are parenting (“student-parents”). The summit built on a series of discussions that have gradually raised awareness of the growing number of exceptionally-qualified student-parents at Illinois, and the challenges they face while attempting to complete their educational programs.

In attendance were representatives from a cross-section of colleges, units, and programs including the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Relations (OIIR), University Housing, College of Education, I-Parents, Center for Education in Small Urban Communities, Student Legal Services and College of Law, Campus Recreation, Office of Volunteer Programs, Graduate College, Office of Minority Student Affairs, RISK, a student-parent registered student organization, and more (see table 1). The summit provided the opportunity to bring together a diverse representation of the units on the Illinois campus responsible for supporting student-parents. The cross-disciplinary dialogue provided a deeper understanding of issues faced, created a working group and subcommittees to respond to ideas and move them forward, and developed a white paper to summarize ideas and identify recommendations.

The first challenge to understanding the issue of diversity with the student-parent population is that there are no data on exactly how many student-parents are currently attending the University of Illinois. During the academic year of 2011-2012, an I-Parents team responded to the White Paper's priority-one recommendation and developed a mixed-methods survey focused on providing a better picture of the nature of student-parents, particularly at the University of Illinois. We are thankful we had the opportunity to conduct this research and appreciate the ability to present the results. We look forward to working with you as we celebrate successes that were identified through the survey and work to address concerns to create a welcoming, supportive environment for all University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) students and their families.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

Waves of Change. Traditional undergraduate students are typically identified as recent secondary school graduates between the ages of 18 and 23 years. However several distinct waves of nontraditional students have been entering higher education beginning with post-World War II and Korean War veterans. The GI Bill provided unprecedented financial opportunity to attend higher education, and many returning veterans, predominantly men, brought their families. Universities, including Illinois, provided housing for the families and offered other resources to support spouses and children. Researchers (Bennett 1996; Mettler 2005) credit this wave of new students with changing the face of higher education and generating a surge in our democracy and the economy.



From 1970 to 1990, the several waves of nontraditional students and student-parents entering higher education gained attention (Hazzard 1993; Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002). One wave occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and may have been tied to an economic recession. During this period, veterans were returning from Vietnam and looking for education to improve employment options in the public sector.

By the 1980s, 58.2% of all students were over the age of 22 (Quinnan 1997). In 1985, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching projected that higher education would soon face mammoth change, as institutions would need to adapt and respond to the needs of nontraditional students to retrain for a new economy more highly focused on technology in the work environment (Newman 1985; Hazzard 1993).

The most recent wave of attention on student-parents came in the late 1990s with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002; Duquaine-Watson 2007). Following a work-first approach, adults receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) were discouraged from pursuing educational options beyond the GED. Educational advocates were concerned that existing low-income students, many of them single mothers and first-generation college students, would be forced to drop their post-secondary education programs despite their successful matriculation and being within reach of higher-paying jobs with benefits. Some states created their own programs to continue to encourage post-secondary education as a pathway out of poverty for adults and their families (Polakow et al. 2004; Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002).

A parent reflects about her college experience: "I have grown as a person and can now be very proud of myself as well as my children. Two of my children were on the honor roll in school and they have expressed that it is due to all of my influence and watching me study for many years" (Smith, Deprez, and Butler 2002, page 15).

New Wave of Student-Parents and Today's Promise. After all these adaptations, higher education is still unprepared for one of today's most common type of nontraditional student: the student-parent. Student-parents are still found within the traditional married student configuration but may also be cohabiting, in a committed relationship, or single, reflecting the changing demographics of our society.

The student-parent may be single, struggle with poverty, or be a member of a minority group (Polakow et al. 2004; Duquaine-Watson 2007). The issues highlighted in the literature review, including concerns about financing, education, and providing sufficient support for the children and partners of student-parents, overlapped with University of Illinois student-parents.

Similar to previous decades when returning veterans sought out opportunities in higher education, we are seeing an increase in veterans from recent tours attempting to make conscientious educational choices that would improve their employability in civilian life. We are also experiencing a protracted economic recession that has disrupted the lives of many adults, pushing them to seek educational

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options as they attempt to retrain and enter the work force in ways that are reminiscent of the challenges of the 1980s. It is likely that we are on the swell of a new wave of nontraditional students attempting to enter higher education, including student-parents at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This survey provides information to further this conversation about the nature and needs of student-parents in post-secondary education and how institutions of higher education, specifically our university, may respond.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

Participants, Method, and Procedures. This project posed three key research questions:

R1: What is the demographic picture of student-parents at UIUC?

R2: What are the needs and desired services for student-parents at UIUC?

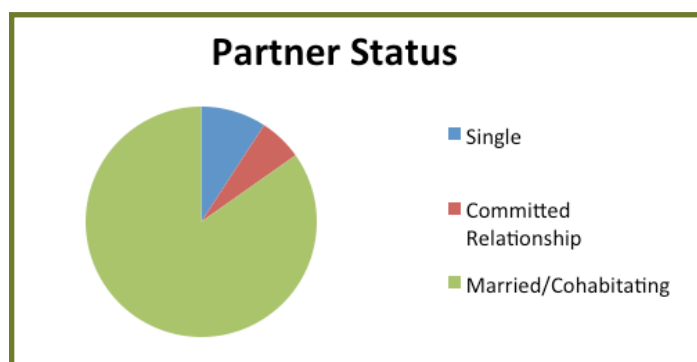
R3: Are there differences in the experiences of student-parents across demographic groups?

Student-parents were recruited through a targeted massmail sent to every student at UIUC not currently living in undergraduate university-sponsored residence halls. In total, 417 student-parents responded to the survey, with 352 completing the survey in full. The items on the survey were generated from the findings of the 2011 summit, rephrased as questions, and rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. In addition to questions related to needs and desired services, participants also were asked to provide demographic information across a number of areas, including race, age, gender, sexual orientation, income, housing arrangements, partner status, work status, student status, age of children, number of children, and composition of household. The survey concluded with a narrative section that allowed participants to expand on questions or present other issues that were relevant to them. At the conclusion of the survey, participants were presented with a list of family-friendly resources within the community and were given the chance to submit their e-mail for future contact about student-parent related opportunities or events. However the survey was completely anonymous, and the e-mail was not connected with survey results.

Findings. Table 2 expands on the quantitative findings from the survey; expanded results are in the I-parents documents.

The following provides highlights of each research question.

R1: What is the demographic picture of student-parents at UIUC?



“ I have some savings and an employed spouse, but I am seriously concerned about my ability to finish my degree before our savings are depleted, and other students in this position would not necessarily have even the amount of cushion that I do.”

Student-parent comment

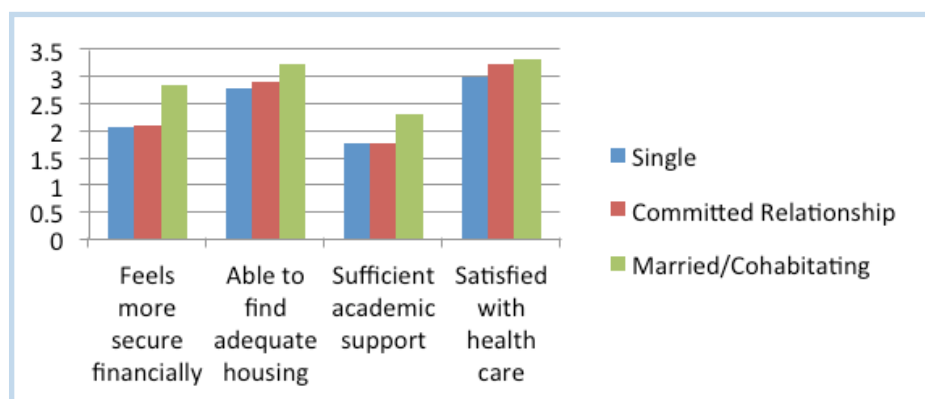
R2: What are the needs and desired services for student-parents at UIUC?

Of the eight categories provided participants identified child care (72.4%), academics (61.6%), and financial concerns (54.8%) as being most important. Then fitness and recreational space (23.6%), family services (17.6%), and healthy food (6.0%) were ranked. The student narratives elaborated on these issues to provide greater insight about their concerns. For example, the following student raised concerns about rigid schedules that are challenging for student-parents.

“ The [student-parent’s college] college has been a very difficult college to work with while also being a parent. Their schedule is extremely stringent, and the availability of sick days is very slim. I do not believe that I would have been supported by any of the faculty had I taken days off to care for my children when they were sick.”

Student-parent concern about academic success

R3: Are there differences in the experiences of student-parents of different groups?



“ As someone who was a single undergraduate student-parent at another university, and a single graduate student-parent here, and now a married graduate student-parent here, I can say that there is a really wide variation of challenges that different types of student-parents face.”

Graduate student-parent comment

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a Web-based information and resource page for student-parents. Accessible from the Illinois.edu home page, this would be a Web resource that notes university family-friendly opportunities and is provided as a link to all accepted students, freshmen through graduate students.
2. Increase access to affordable, flexible child care and improve the university environment through creation of more child-friendly spaces. Affordable child care is in high demand, including the flexibility for evening times, drop-in times, and child care in recreational spaces and other service areas that are part of the student academic and enrichment culture. The spectrum of child care options should be explored.
3. Identify a university office and create a university position responsible for student-parents and their families. Taking a proactive stance, a student-parent office could be a friendly resource for the spectrum of concerns identified. The office would also be helpful for dissuading stereotypical perceptions of the student-parent population, thereby engaging the university community in creating a welcoming atmosphere for all students. It also could be helpful for scaffolding a framework of research specific to student-parent populations in higher education.
4. Establish academic policies and practices that are responsive to the issues faced by student-parents. The changing profile of student-parent families suggests the importance of ongoing dialogue about creating policies and practices that respond to student-parents today.
5. Increase financial-aid literacy, financial support and health-care insurance and delivery options for student-parents. The prevalence of financial concern that includes health-care options, both from survey respondents and in the literature, suggests that a unique recommendation is warranted. One step to address financial literacy is to identify a financial-aid position with expertise on options for student-parents. A second step to help address health insurance and health delivery within the context of financial aid and affordability is to convene a diverse group to annually assess how student-parents' financial and health-care needs are being addressed. Finding the critical gaps and evaluating how the university can reasonably close those gaps to create comprehensive a financial and health-care support packet for student-parents is also requested as we anticipate gaps may periodically vary. We also are requesting that in collaboration with the Foundation, a separate fund be established to specifically respond to student-parent financial support, a fund easily accessible for recommended purposes as needs arise.
6. Create an innovative, whole-family initiative to support undergraduate student-parents pursuing education as a pathway out of poverty. The promise of obtaining a fulfilling job with benefits is slipping away from many, but particularly those with a family history of economic vulnerability. Developing a program that recruits and provides resources and services to support student-parents and their families, who would otherwise not have access to higher education, is an exciting and reasonable extension of a land grant institution's core mission.
7. Create a new residence area within walking distance from campus that has the flexibility to support different configurations of student-parent families. University housing has been involved in a number of exciting renovations to revitalize university living-learning areas. Student-parents and their families should be integral to that conversation and given full consideration in developing plans.

SUMMARY

In summary, the present study represents a significant step toward understanding the demographic makeup, priorities, and needs of student-parents at the University of Illinois. The student-parent population has long been underserved. As our knowledge about student-parents grows, so will our ability to facilitate their education and help create a hospitable environment for both students and their families.

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TABLE 2 N, MEAN, AND (Standard Deviation) OF COMPARISON GROUPS ON LEVEL OF EASE (Factors)

Gender	N	Financial Concerns					Family Services		
		Child Care	Academics	Housing	Health Care	Fitness	Food		
Male	196	2.84 (.68)	2.08 (.91)	2.78 (.87)	3.11 (.65)	2.73 (.78)	2.50 (.79)	3.74 (.67)	
Female	216	2.82 (.67)	2.33 (.99)	2.67 (.97)	3.21 (.68)	2.57 (.80)	2.33 (.71)	3.66 (.92)	
Transgender	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Partner Status									
Single	38	2.62 (.65)	1.76 (1.09)	2.07 (.66)	2.77 (.82)	2.37 (.81)	2.12 (.64)	3.47 (1.26)	
Committed relationship	25	2.66 (.59)	1.76 (.69)	2.10 (.82)	2.91 (.68)	2.48 (.88)	2.08 (.77)	3.69 (.71)	
Married or cohabitating	350	2.85 (.68)	2.32 (1.12)	2.85 (1.02)	3.22 (.63)	2.67 (.77)	2.47 (.81)	3.72 (.82)	
Income									
<\$30k household per year	165	2.71 (.68)	2.23 (1.13)	2.38 (.89)	3.04 (.73)	2.51 (.75)	2.27 (.81)	3.39 (.89)	
>\$30k household per year	178	2.91 (.65)	2.16 (1.07)	3.02 (1.03)	3.28 (.56)	2.72 (.83)	2.54 (.76)	4.01 (.73)	
Housing									
Campus housing	31	3.02 (.53)	2.51 (1.29)	2.48 (.62)	3.19 (.62)	3.16 (.55)	2.83 (.93)	3.57 (.67)	
Off-campus housing	333	2.78 (.68)	2.17 (1.08)	2.70 (1.04)	3.16 (.67)	2.56 (.79)	2.35 (.77)	3.69 (.89)	
Student Status									
Undergraduate	53	2.58 (.76)	2.28 (1.12)	2.44 (.79)	2.86 (.73)	2.39 (.80)	1.88 (.74)	3.37 (.85)	
Graduate	353	2.85 (.64)	2.18 (1.10)	2.73 (1.04)	3.21 (.64)	2.66 (.78)	2.50 (.77)	3.75 (.87)	
Child Status									
Living with child(ren)	345	2.81 (.65)	2.11 (1.07)	2.66 (1.01)	3.17 (.66)	2.64 (.81)	2.37 (.78)	3.71 (.87)	
Not living with child(ren)	69	2.75 (.84)	3.02 (1.14)	2.92 (1.02)	3.07 (.72)	2.38 (.59)	2.57 (.94)	3.42 (.89)	
Total	417	2.95 (.67)	3.81 (.99)	2.87 (.93)	3.17 (.66)	2.73 (.74)	2.41 (.74)	3.82 (.77)	